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Blue Rock Finds a Hot Trend in Cold Storage

Just a few years ago, plans for turning a standard warehouse building into a high-quality cold storage facility would never have reached a drawing board. It just didn't make economic sense.

Today, with increased financial strains in the industrial/warehouse real estate market, Blue Rock Construction, Inc. sees Specialty Conversion and Adaptive Reuse of existing buildings as a new trend.

"It's very unusual, but we do see it as a new trend," said Thomas J. Meagher, senior vice president at Blue Rock. "Right now, the surplus inventory of warehouse real estate available and fierce competition for the few clients in the market has driven developers to invest in their building creating specialized assets."

Blue Rock converted an empty 55,000-square-foot warehouse space into a cold storage facility that now houses 36,950 square feet of temperature controlled space including, cold storage, cold docks and a packaging area for FoodSource in Bethlehem, PA. This facility also includes 4,200 square feet of office space and 13,850 square feet used for dry storage.



FoodSource, a C.H. Robinson-owned company, provides fresh produce and other refrigerated products to clients such as Trader Joe's and Aldi Foods. Blue Rock was hired by IDS Real Estate Group to design and build FoodSource's cold storage facility.

"In prior years, you would never have a cooler building going into an existing building like this," said Jim Hoolehan, P.E., vice president at Blue Rock. "It was more economical to build from scratch. Developers are getting creative for their clients with existing building space. Perhaps retrofitting an existing building into cold storage is the wave of the future."

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Construction on the cold storage facility began in mid July with an occupancy permit in hand by October 5th. Temperatures in the cold storage areas range from 34 degrees in three large cooler rooms to 45 degrees in the cold dock area. The temperature change was accomplished by installing split-system refrigeration units with electric defrost features to eliminate frost buildup.

"There was a lot of planning in the front end," said Hoolehan. "You need to look at all the details and figure out how you're going to execute the plan. This was a standard warehouse with standard insulation in the roof, not built for cold storage."

Consequently, in order to make it cooler, Blue Rock removed the existing roof and replaced it with two layers of insulation, and, more importantly, provided a vapor barrier seal.

"It's like when you have a glass of ice water on a warm day," said Hoolehan. "The glass begins to sweat. The building operates on the same principle. When you are creating a cold storage facility, you are chilling the building and the steel. Any cold surface that hits warm air starts to condensate. That was our biggest issue to tackle in designing the building improvements. We had to take this facility and turn it into a cooler and not have one drop of condensation. It involved quite a bit of roof re-construction, injecting foam, reestablishing vapor barriers and making sure everything was sealed tight."

Blue Rock also installed a patented ESFR Cold Storage System in the 34 degree cooler areas utilizing pressurized propylene glycol/water solution in the sprinkler pipes with K25 heads. This system allows FoodSource to utilize the existing ESFR water supply while eliminating the need to install expensive dry systems where freezing is a concern.

"A produce user would typically have its own standalone facility," said Meagher. "Making this type of modification to a developer-owned building was a very unusual requirement, but it does look like it's becoming a new trend. And the good news is, Blue Rock has another satisfied customer."

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Blue Rock, including our
History and Services, visit
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